

GASPÉ OF YESTERDAY

THE WRECK
OF
THE SCHOONER "SWORDFISH"
AT
ANSE PLEUREUSE
IN
GASPESIA
NOVEMBER 30, 1867

KEN ANNETT

THE WRECK OF THE SCHOONER "SWORDFISH"

Late November of the year 1867 was bitterly cold in the old seaport of Québec but on the 27th of the month, when the schooner "SWORDFISH" was ready to set sail for Halifax, Nova Scotia, the cold had abated and the wind was favourable. Captain Duquet of the "SWORDFISH" had, as his First and Second Mates, Cyprien Morin and André Castagne, experienced mariners. The rest of the crew included Antoine Laprise and his wife, the ship's cook, Patrick Reilly and Lawrence Boyle. The schooner was sound, well rigged and equipped, so that a fast, happy voyage was anticipated.

THE EARLY VOYAGE

In mid-morning of November 28th the "SWORDFISH" was off Pointe au Père where the pilot disembarked. Shortly after a strong breeze arose and continued until midnight when it suddenly died away leaving the schooner in an ominous calm for a time. The calm was soon ended, however, by a rising East wind accompanied by large flakes of snow. As dusk fell over the river the sails were reefed, all running gear well secured and the schooner headed out to sea. At dawn of the following morning the wind died down, the snow stopped, and as "SWORDFISH" was off Pointe des Monts the visibility had improved to the point that the crew could see both shores. Captain Duquet set course to pass to the South of Anticosti Island.

FURIOUS STORM

The vagaries of winter weather in the St. Lawrence estuary are such that by 8:00 p.m. the "SWORDFISH" was in the midst of a howling tempest that carried away two of her sails. The temperature dropped suddenly, ice coated the helm, making steering next to impossible, and huge waves washed over the decks. By midnight the storm had increased in fury with thick snow driven level by the violent wind. Visibility was reduced to less than

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rest throughout the night, cried, "Land! Land ! I see land ! Great God! We are lost ! " Shortly after the schooner struck violently on a rocky shore with a loud and sinister crack of broken timbers. "SWORDFISH" listed to the side and lay with huge waves, that her crew described as fifty feet high, breaking over her. The crew, drenched with the frigid water, clung to the wreck awaiting daybreak.

FROM THE WRECK TO SHORE

It was not until 8:00 a.m., that there was sufficient light for the Captain to see that the schooner was wrecked on Pointe-du-Gros Mâle, the rocky promontory to the East of Anse Pleureuse on the rugged North coast of Gaspesia. At risk to his life, the Mate, André Castagne, proceeded to cut down the mainmast which fell towards shore but remained attached to the ship by the tangle of rigging. This mast, soon coated with ice by the frigid water, offered a possible line of escape from the wreck to shore, albeith a perilous one. After a moving farewell to his wife, Antoine Laprise, together with Castagne, Morin, Reilly and Boyle succeeded in gaining shore along the line of the mast and through the pounding surf. Captain Duquet made a valiant attempt but worn out from his vigil and with his hands frozen from the icy water, slipped from sight and perished.

Of the crew that reached shore, Cyprien Morin, alone, was fit to walk. Making his way along the snow-covered shoreline towards the hamlet of Anse Pleureuse he finally met two of the local inhabitants and told them of the wreck and plight of his fellow crewmen. One of the Anse Pleureuse men, M. Bouchard, hastened to alert the families of the hamlet and seek assistance. Meanwhile, André Castagne, his hands and feet frozen, had tried to crawl up the rocky cliff at the rear of the beach. Unable to reach the top or to cling to the rock, he rolled down the slope and lay on the beach, resigned to die.

TO LIVE AND TO DIE

dusk was settling down over the tragic scene, they first came across Antoine Laprise. A fire was built on the beach, Laprise moved to it, and the search continued. Patrick Reilly and Lawrence Boyle were found next, further along the beach. At low tide it was possible to reach the wreck where Madame Laprise was found, still alive but near her end. Carried ashore, she died within the hour in her husband's arms. Finally, by sheer luck, André Castagne, was found where he had rolled to the base of the cliff, and was carried to the fire. A rude tent was erected near the fire with the remains of the sails of the "SWORDFISH" and four of the Anse Pleureuse villagers remained overnight with the survivors. A messenger was dispatched to the settlement of Mont-Louis with news of the wreck for the local priest, the Abbé Pierre Roussel.

SURVIVORS TO MONT-LOUIS

It was not until December 3rd that the sea had calmed enough to permit two fishing boats to sail to Anse Pleureuse to bring the survivors and the body of Madame Laprise to Mont Louis. The survivors were found to be in shocking condition - in the case of André Castagne it was found impossible to move him by boat to Mont-Louis. A place was found for him in one of the houses of Anse Pleureuse - a house so rudely built that the wind and snow blew in through the cracks in the walls. The inhabitants had no flour to make bread - their fare was herring and potatoes. So destitute was the hamlet that in order to obtain grease to smear on Castagne's frozen limbs resort was had to killing a cat.

The condition of Castagne steadily worsened. He suffered terribly as his hands and feet turned black and often lost consciousness. The Abbé Roussel of Mont -Louis, advised of this, recruited a party of eight men with a sleigh to go to Anse Pleureuse and attempt to bring Castagne back with them. There was real doubt that he could survive the trip, but he did, and was placed in the Mont-Louis home

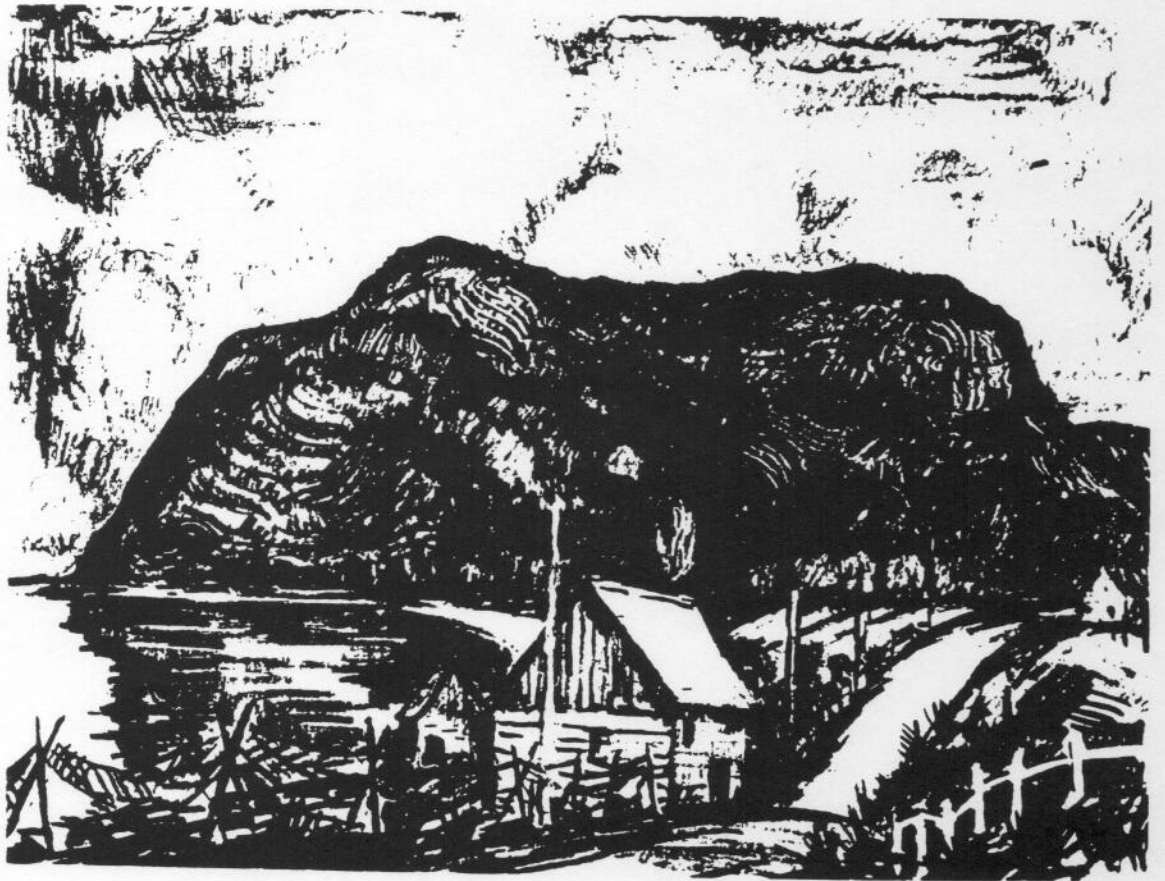
MEDICAL ATTENTION AT LAST

As there was no doctor in Mont-Louis, nor within hundreds of miles, the Abbé Roussel sent word to Québec of the urgent need for medical service. In response to the situation of the wreck victims at Mont-Louis and also to the needs of survivors of the wreck of the "WOODSTOCK" at Manche d'Epée, some miles to the eastward along the coast, the Québec authorities arranged for Dr. Parke, an assistant and guide to travel to Gaspesia. The winter roads were nearly impassable but the party pushed on, having to travel from Ste-Anne-des-Monts on snowshoes. It was the end of December before they reached Mont-Louis. On January 1st., 1868, Dr. Parke amputated André Castagne's fingers of both hands but declined to operate further as his patient was too feeble. Both Patrick Reilly and Lawrence Boyle refused to permit the doctor to amputate their toes but subsequently were to see their toes drop off from their feet.

On his return to Mont-Louis from Manche d'Epée, Dr. Parke proceeded to amputate one of Castagne's feet and before leaving to return to Québec on January 10th., amputated the other foot. Cyprien Morin was well enough to accompany Dr. Parke back to Québec.

EPILOGUE

It was not until May, 1868 that the survivors of the wreck of the schooner "SWORDFISH" who had wintered at Mont-Louis were well enough to embark on the schooner of Captain Rousseau for their return to Québec. On arrival there they were admitted to the Marine Hospital where André Castagne had to undergo further surgery. In his case the days of sailing were over for good. With his wife and seven children he had to rely on public assistance for the rest of his days.



Anse-Pleureuse